

# **Serbia and Vietnam**

## **A Preliminary Comparison of U. S. Decisions to Use Force**

**Jeffrey Record**

**May 1999**

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By  
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## **The Author**

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## **Preface**

NATO's controversial decision to attack Serbia in March 1999 because of its behavior in Kosovo prompted considerable criticism in the United States. Some critics faulted the United States and its NATO allies for selecting military means incompatible with the political objective sought. Others contended that the alliance had misjudged Belgrade's strength of interest in Kosovo, and therefore willingness to defy NATO. Still others asserted that the need to maintain political consensus within the alliance was crippling NATO's military effectiveness against Serbia. Many compared the decision to attack Serbia with the Johnson's administration's disastrous 1965 decision to commit US ground combat forces to Vietnam.

In the pages that follow, Jeffrey Record examines the Vietnam and Serbia decisions, noting not only some unusual similarities but also some profound differences. Written at the end of the first month of Operation Allied Force, his judgments on NATO's decision to launch a bombing campaign against Serbia are necessarily tentative, but there is an urgent need to identify and understand the parallels and contrasts between these two decisions. US technological superiority was defeated in Vietnam, and as of this writing, a technologically superior NATO has failed to impose its will on tiny Serbia. A comparative assessment of the Vietnam and Serbia decisions may provide insights on the future course of the present war in the Balkans and its termination.



## Introduction

NATO's March 24, 1999 attack on Serbia and the events leading up to it prompted many observers to postulate that the disastrous American intervention in the Vietnam War is an analogy. Indeed, one of the principal architects of that disaster, Robert S. McNamara, believes that "Studying the lessons of Vietnam may allow us to end this war earlier; ignoring them may result in catastrophe."<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to examine the similarities and differences in the circumstances surrounding the US decisions to use force in Vietnam in 1965 and against Serbia in 1999. Specifically, I will look at the following items: decision-making personalities and processes, policy miscalculations, the relationship between military means and political ends, the regional and international political and strategic environments, public and congressional attitudes, and the state of civil-military relations.

This examination of these two decisions to use force leads me to the following conclusion: the quality of the decision to fight in Vietnam in 1965, notwithstanding that decision's disastrous consequences, was greatly superior to that of the decision to attack Serbia. The American disaster in Vietnam was rooted not in the intervention decision itself, which was a logical response to the character of the threat to perceived US strategic interests in Southeast Asia in the mid-1960s. Rather, it stemmed from a misinterpretation of the character and significance of the war in South Vietnam, an underestimation of the enemy's fighting power and overestimation of our own, and the innate political and military weaknesses of our client regime in Saigon. Indeed, I believe the US response to the Kosovo crisis will go down as a case study in strategic incompetence. What has unfolded in the Balkans is a technically proficient pursuit of a militarily irrelevant strategy on behalf of an unrealistic political objectives.<sup>2</sup>

We are also witnessing a demonstration of the strategic price exacted by the elevation of casualty minimization over military effectiveness. NATO is playing at war, not making it. Or, to put it another way, "This is a war in which one side--the United States and its NATO allies--has set out as a matter of policy to hold itself harm free."<sup>3</sup>

Before taking a look at the Vietnam and Kosovo decisions, let me first point out what is perhaps the most important historical difference between the two: unlike the Clinton administration, the Johnson administration in 1965 did not have the experience of Vietnam to inform its decision-making. The lessons of Vietnam were yet to be learned. Nor did the Johnson administration have available the experience of the Gulf War. Both wars bulged with instruction about how to use--and how not to use--force effectively. The availability of the Vietnam and Gulf War experiences

imposed upon the Clinton administration an especially heavy burden to get it right against Serbia. To put it another way, back in 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not have H.R. McMaster's *Dereliction of Duty* as assigned reading by the Secretary of Defense. In the wake of Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm, there is no excuse for the travesty of Operation Allied Force.

It might have been better not to have acted at all than to have acted in such a hesitant, feckless manner. Credible inaction, however, would have required deliberate avoidance of placing NATO's credibility on the line during the year leading up to the attack on Serbia. Yet, by repeatedly threatening to strike, and then always stepping back, NATO put itself in a position where by March 1999, it could not afford not to act.<sup>4</sup> At no time during this year of threats did the Clinton administration appear to have confronted, in a clear and comprehensive fashion, the issue of just exactly how far it was prepared to go to stop Belgrade's odious behavior in Kosovo. Nor did the administration appear to understand that in making repeated threats, it was not only laying NATO's credibility on the line but also strengthening Milosevic politically at home. Thus Washington set itself and NATO on a collision course with Belgrade.

Let me also add that primary responsibility for Operation Allied Force, as well as the US debacle in Vietnam, rests squarely upon civilian decision-makers, not the professional military. Having said that, however, I would point out that the Vietnam War did raise the issue of the loyalty of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to a war effort they regarded as self-defeating. Additionally, even taking into consideration the significant political restrictions under which the US military labored in Vietnam, its performance left much to be desired.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, please note that any judgments on the decision to use force against Serbia are necessarily provisional, based on informed speculation rather than a documented historical record. As of this writing, Allied Force is still a work in progress. We know much more about the decision to use force in Vietnam than the decision to attack Serbia, and we know absolutely nothing about how this latest war in the Balkans will turn out. Thus, for information and perspective on the decision to attack Serbia, I have relied primarily on official statements and testimony, unfolding news accounts, discussions with former professional colleagues in Washington, information leaked by government sources, including those seeking to distance themselves and their agencies from either the decision to use force or the manner in which force was employed.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, I have relied on my own prior research on the Vietnam War and on the impact of reasoning by historical analogy on American use of force decisions since 1945.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the reader must recognize that this essay's narrow focus excludes an examination of the course of the war against Serbia (except in so far as it sheds light on NATO's decision to attack Serbia), the political implications of Operation Allied

Force for NATO and the Balkans, or the professional performance of US and allied forces.

## **Personalities and Processes**

In comparing the Vietnam and Kosovo decisions, one is quickly struck by the similarities between the two presidents involved. In both Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton we see skilled southern politicians essentially disinterested in foreign policy. Both had ambitious domestic political agendas and paid attention to foreign policy issues only when they had to. Both feared the intrusion of foreign policy on their domestic political agendas, and in at least the case of Johnson those fears were well founded.

With respect to the decision-making process, that of the Johnson administration, as minutely chronicled in the Pentagon Papers, was considerably more deliberate, formal, and comprehensive than that which seems to have drawn the Clinton administration into war with Serbia. While both Johnson and Clinton were reluctant warriors, Johnson thoroughly vetted the prospective decision to commit in Vietnam among the relevant government departments and did so over a period of seven months following the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. Extensive assessments of the anticipated costs, risks, and gains of intervention were provided by the National Security Council staff and by the State and Defense departments, all of which favored interventions.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and other administration spokesmen consistently and forcefully declared what they believed to be the vitality of US interests at stake in Indochina. Those interests were containing communist expansion into Southeast Asia, validating the credibility of American commitments elsewhere, and demonstrating that the communists' chosen tool of aggression, so-called "wars of national liberation," could be defeated. They further declared the willingness of the United States to do whatever was necessary to defend those interests. These men were Cold Warriors who believed in force as a necessary evil and were not afraid to use it. Nor was Johnson, during the critical period 1964-65, distracted by a politically disastrous personal scandal.

In apparent contrast, the process that produced the decision to attack Serbia appears to have been much more a made-up-along-the-way affair, at least within the Clinton White House, which represented a liberal, Vietnam War-seared political generation that tended to view force as an unnecessary evil. The decision was taken after a year of both episodic White House attention to the mounting crisis in Kosovo and of a policy toward Belgrade aptly characterized by former National Security

Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski as one of "threatening loudly but waving a wet noodle."<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, unlike Johnson and his lieutenants, the Clinton administration waited until the last minute before it attempted to make a consistent and convincing public case for why the United States might have to go to war over Kosovo. Was the administration "negligently optimistic"<sup>10</sup> that Slobodan Milosevic would never let it come to war? Was the president preoccupied with extrication from the legal and political consequences of his reckless personal behavior?<sup>11</sup>

Part of the problem for Clinton, in contrast to Johnson, was a lack of high-level consensus within the administration on whether to use force against Serbia. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, known for her robust confidence in coercive diplomacy and embarrassed by her failure at Rambouillet,<sup>12</sup> apparently led the charge, supported by National Security Advisor Sandy Berger. Albright was convinced that Milosevic would fold after a few days of bombing; on the day Allied Force was launched, she declared on the PBS "NewsHour" that "I don't see this as a long-term operation. I think that this is...achievable within a relatively short period of time." (Less than two weeks later, she stated on NBC's "Meet the Press" that "We never expected this to be over quickly .... We are in there for a long time.")<sup>13</sup>

Decidedly unenthusiastic were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, if not necessarily General Wesley Clark, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander.<sup>14</sup> According to reliable Washington Post and Newsweek accounts, the Chairman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff complained that US security interests in the Kosovo crisis were insufficient to justify going to war and warned their civilian superiors that bombing would not likely achieve its political aims. Indeed, JCS Chairman General Henry Shelton reportedly stunned Secretary of State Albright with his prediction that air strikes would actually encourage a humanitarian disaster in Kosovo.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, once the Serbs accelerated their war on Kosovar Albanians, the Defense Department publicly claimed that it had foreseen Belgrade's action. "In the Pentagon, in this building, we were not surprised by, what Milosevic has done," announced spokesman Kenneth Bacon on March 31. "I think there is historical amnesia here if anyone says they are surprised by this [ethnic cleansing] campaign."<sup>17</sup>

The Intelligence Community appears to have been divided on how Belgrade would react to a NATO bombing campaign. A January 1999 interagency intelligence report concluded that Milosevic would sue for peace after putting up a perfunctory defense. However, a CIA estimate made the same month postulated a defiant Milosevic, convinced that NATO could not maintain the political unity required for a sustained air campaign. Others predicted that Belgrade would simply step up its war against the Kosovo Liberation Army. And in February, CIA Director George Tenet publicly testified that Milosevic ' would indeed attempt to cleanse Kosovo of all its Albanian inhabitants.<sup>18</sup>

Somewhere in the middle stood the acutely poll-sensitive President Clinton, whose record on use-of-force decisions in Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia had been one of hesitation and indecision. (In sharp contrast stood Presidents Harry Truman and George Bush, who did not hesitate to go to war in Korea and the Persian Gulf, respectively, even in the absence of any prior formal commitment" r threats-4o do so.)

The biggest decision-making process difference, of course, is that Operation Allied Force was an enterprise prosecuted by an international political committee-NATO, whereas the Johnson administration was unconstrained by the need to maintain a consensus among 18 other allies-a consensus whose preservation undoubtedly compromised NATO's potential military effectiveness against Serbia.<sup>19</sup> Compromise is, after all, the business of committees. At this juncture, however, we simply don't know the degree to which the need to secure unanimity within NATO affected the scope of NATO's military response to defiant Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. We do know that levels of enthusiasm for Operation Allied Force varied widely within a newly expanded NATO, with the British and Americans most enthusiastic, and the Italians, and even more so the Greeks, at the opposite end of the spectrum. We also know that four weeks into Operation Allied Force, NATO still had not decided whether to shutdown Serbian television and radio broadcasts, or whether to block sea-borne and overland oil shipments into Serbia because the alliance could not forge a consensus to attack these Mgets.<sup>20</sup> Thus, allied pilots were risking their lives attacking oil refineries but prohibited from attacking supplies to those refineries.

## Miscalculations

Let me now turn to policy miscalculations. First, both the Johnson administration and Clinton administration decision-makers displayed a remarkable ignorance of, or at least indifference to, the enemy's strength of interest in South Vietnam and Kosovo, respectively, which in turn led them to underestimate the enemy's willingness to fight and sacrifice. In both South Vietnam and Kosovo, the enemy's strength of interest was virtually absolute, whereas that of the United States was limited. In both cases the United States fought a limited war while our enemies fought total ones. What David Ignatius has called "the law of disproportionate interest" governed both wars.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in terms of air power's application, Operation Allied Force bears a pathetic comparison not only to Operation Desert Storm but also to Operation Rolling Thunder, which properly remains the object of professional military condemnation. Compared to Allied Force, Rolling Thunder was titanic and savage.<sup>22</sup>

For Hanoi, what was at stake in South Vietnam was nothing less than national reunification and the expulsion of hated foreign influence.<sup>23</sup> For Belgrade, Kosovo was not just an integral part of Serbia but the seat of Serbian national identity. Kosovo was not Bosnia redux. Belgrade could-and did - dump the Bosnian Serbs, who in the summer of 1994 were being rolled up by a Croatian-Muslim ground offensive as well as being pounded by NATO air strikes. But no Serbian president could turn over part of his own country to a foreign occupation force without a fight. Note Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne: "It is as if the nineteenth-century concert of Europe had forced President Lincoln to accept Southern independence and European troops on American soil, and had threatened to intervene militarily in support of the Confederate Army if Lincoln refused."<sup>24</sup> "What was going on in Bosnia was completely different politically, historically and emotionally from what is going on in Kosovo," observed Anthony Cordesman as Belgrade escalated its ethnic cleansing of Kosovo in the wake of initial NATO air strikes.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, US policy-makers in the 1960s underestimated the potency of Vietnamese nationalism and the degree to which the Vietnamese communists

had appropriated it on behalf of their war effort, and in the 1990s they subsequently seemed ignorant of both the strength and heavily victimological

character of Serbian nationalism. Ho Chi Minh was no more going to be bombed into a diplomatic compromise (or bought off by the promise of US-financed regional development program<sup>26</sup>) than Slobodan Milosevic was going to be seared into signing the Rambouillet Agreement by the threat or actual delivery of NATO air strikes. Yet in 1965, no high-level US decision-maker, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, imagined that the Vietnamese communists were prepared to fight as long and as hard as they subsequently did. Indeed, within the professional air power community there was excessive confidence in aerial bombing as an instrument of coercion; a whiff of American air power, it was thought, would convince Hanoi to mend its ways.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, it is clear that Secretary of State Albright believed, and that the Clinton White House at least wanted to believe, that Milosevic would quickly fold either before being bombed or after a few days of strikes.<sup>28</sup> There is no other explanation for the manifest lack of preparation for the expanded air campaign that eventually followed or for dealing with the flood of refugees generated by Belgrade's accelerated ethnic cleansing of Kosovo.<sup>29</sup>

And here we come to a second major miscalculation shared between the Vietnam War and Operation Allied Force decision-makers: lack of imagination in anticipating likely enemy responses to air attack. Neither North Vietnam nor Serbia were in a position to effectively resist air attack, and both responded to bombardment asymmetrically by aggressive action on the ground-North Vietnam by escalating the movement of its regular army forces down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and Serbia by escalating its actions against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Yet both of these ground

war escalations caught incumbent US political administrations by surprise, and the real surprise is why they were surprised. Was confidence in the coercive power of bombardment such as to convince decision-makers that they enemy would not dare escalate on the ground? Or was it simply a case of arrogance--4.e., the conviction that no small, backward, Third World country could rationally contemplate war against the world's strongest power once the United States had credibly demonstrated, via initial bombing, a willingness to use force? In either case, failure to think through what the enemy might do--as opposed to what he was supposed to do--was a major strategic error.' To be sure, some in the Intelligence Community, as well as JCS Chairman General Shelton himself, anticipated the possibility, even the probability, that Belgrade would respond to NATO's strikes by terrorizing Kosovo's entire Albanian population. But the President and Secretary of State apparently did not believe-or want to believe--that Milosevic was prepared to be so brutal, despite having the precedent of Bosnia to inform them. The end result was a military operation that took no precautions, a war plan that simply looked the other way.

What is particularly disturbing about Operation Allied Force is that, by the end of the twentieth century, confidence in air power as a means of political communication had been substantially discredited, which meant, among other things, that attempts to break the political will of a defiant dictatorial regime mandated a combination of ground as well as air options. The Johnson administration may have had the record of the World War II strategic bombing campaigns available for examination and policy guidance, but the professional military itself was divided over what lessons could properly be drawn from those campaigns. In 1964-65 the Air Force was dominated by the Strategic Air Command and the conviction that air power could win wars autonomously. And when it became clear by the spring of 1965 that bombing North Vietnam was not going to prevent the fall of South Vietnam, the Johnson administration did not flinch in committing US ground forces. Moreover, this decision was perfectly consistent with not only the perceived strength of US security interests in Southeast Asia but also the political objective of preserving a non-communist South Vietnam.

By the time Operation Allied Force was launched, however, there was no excuse, at least in Washington, for confidence in bombing alone as a tool for political coercion. The Clinton administration not only had the experience of the Johnson administration in Vietnam at its disposal. It also had the experience of the Gulf War and the following decade's worth of coercive air and cruise missile strikes against military and regime targets in Iraq, as well as the experience on Bosnia, where it took the combination of NATO air strikes and a spectacular Croatian-Muslim ground offensive to drive the Bosnian Serbs to the conference table. Robert Pape, author the 1996 book, *Bombing To Win, Air Power and Coercion in War*, observed during the second week of Allied Force, that "in Bosnia, the air power and the Croatian and

Muslim ground forces were working as a hammer and anvil. Right now, there is only a hammer.:<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it is not unreasonable to assume that Milosevic's refusal to buckle over Kosovo in the face of threatened NATO air action was encouraged by Saddam Hussein's survival of repeated US attempts to coerce him from the air. The Clinton administration's penchant for punitive albeit strategically impotent cruise missile strikes, which a colleague of mine in the Office of the Secretary of Defense characterized as "aerial drive-by shootings that do nothing more than enrage the other side," was well established by March 24, 1999, the day Operation Allied Force was launched.<sup>31</sup>

## **Ends and Means**

But Milosevic's defiance undoubtedly also was encouraged by the Clinton administration's (and NATO's) repeated declarations, before and during Operation Allied Force, that no US ground forces would be committed to combat. And it is here that we confront perhaps the most egregious aspect of the decision to use force against Serbia: the disconnection between military means employed and the political objective sought. The Johnson administration did not make this mistake in Vietnam; as noted, the commitment of US ground combat forces to South Vietnam was consistent with the political objective of preserving South Vietnam from a takeover by Vietnamese communist ground forces. And in fact, US intervention on the ground in South Vietnam did block a communist victory there until the United States terminated its combat presence in that country.

But what was the connection between a timid air campaign aimed at "degrading" Serbian military power and the desired termination of Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo? Kosovar Albanians were not threatened by Serbian air defenses, bridges over the Danube, or empty headquarters buildings in down-town Belgrade; they were threatened, and threatened immediately, by Serbian police, paramilitary, and other Serbian forces on the ground in Kosovo, which responded to the launching of Allied Force by actually accelerating the rape and pillage of Kosovo as a surprised Clinton White House and NATO looked helplessly on. As Tony Judt has noted, "In Kosovo, as in Cambodia, Somalia, and Rwanda, ethnic cleansing (the 'final solution' to a local political or communal problem) is an artisanal undertaking; the work of small groups of men wielding clubs, knives, axes, pistols, rifles, flame throwers or, at the technological high end, submachine guns."<sup>32</sup> Eliot Cohen's judgment was harsher still: "it was absurd to think that the stylized air operations that began this conflict could prevent bands of men with automatic weapons from driving off or shooting civilians in Kosovo. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright rightly resents the notion that she and the administration are morally responsible for the predictable slaughter that resulted; but they were appallingly naive if they expected anything else."<sup>33</sup>



And what was meant by "degrade" and "substantially diminish" Serbia's military capability? This sounds eerily like Westmoreland's doomed attempt to "attrit" the Vietnamese communist forces into a state of military ineffectiveness. Indeed, what is (in Clinton's own words) a military campaign to "destroy as much of his military capability as we can, so that each day his capacity for repression will diminish," if not attrition?<sup>34</sup> Allied Force "is not war," declared Charles Krauthammer. "This is 'asset' depletion."<sup>35</sup> And even if Serbia's military power could be diminished to the point where it could no longer control Kosovo, so what? While Belgrade may in the end be driven to accept unfavorable terms for a cessation of hostilities, Serbia has already won the war in Kosovo. Notwithstanding NATO demands that it cease and desist, Serbia has butchered or burned out enough Kosovar Albanians--the very people that Allied Force sought to safeguard--to change the future of Kosovo forever. As one observer put it, paraphrasing the notorious remark made by a US military officer in Vietnam, "It appears that we must let Kosovo be destroyed in order to save it."<sup>36</sup>

The absence of a credible ground combat force option in place, such as that the Bush administration-led coalition mustered for the Gulf War, not only encouraged Milosevic to defy NATO; it also doomed Operation Allied Force to strategic failure. Worse still was the humiliation. "The same [NATO] leaders who told us we had a moral obligation to stop the killing in Kosovo," despaired David Gergen, "now had a hundred excuses why that was suddenly inconvenient."<sup>37</sup> Coercive bombing alone, especially a campaign so limited in scope as Allied Force, carried with it yet another penalty: loss of initiative.

Colin Powell observed that "The challenge of just using air power is that you leave in the hands of your adversary to decide when he's been punished enough. So the initiative will remain with President Milosevic."<sup>38</sup> yet, this is not true just of air power but of war itself. It is always the case in war that your adversary decides when he is defeated. Even virtually destroyed enemies can make non-negotiable demands, as did the Japanese to preserve their Emperor even in defeat. And it is Milosevic, not NATO, who has had the initiative from the very start of the Kosovo crisis in early 1998; NATO has done little more than react to *faits accomplis*.

A ground combat force option in place, in Albania, Hungary, or both, would have compelled Serb forces to concentrate for defense against invasion, and therefore present lucrative targets for air attack; it also would have provided the capacity to enter Kosovo on behalf of the threatened Albanian population. To be sure, putting a ground combat force option in place would have been logistically challenging, but meeting logistical challenges has been a Pentagon hallmark. And to be sure, there was little if any support within NATO for an up-front, in-place ground combat option. But these facts excuse neither the Clinton administration nor the NATO allies from nonetheless proceeding with a half-baked military enterprise. The severe

judgment in early April of retired General William Odom, former Director of the National Security Agency, still seems irrefutable: "U.S. intervention in Kosovo is fast turning into a disaster. Today we are at war without an effective plan and properly deployed forces, conducting combat operations that accelerate Serb atrocities rather than deter them."<sup>39</sup>

Casualty avoidance is not a strategy. As France's ex-commander in Bosnia once said of American illusions about "safe" combat, "Who are these soldiers who are ready to HI and not ready to die?"<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, the launching of Operation Allied Force seemed driven more by the need to be seen to be doing something militarily even if that something was unable to attain the political objective. Again, one is eerily reminded of Vietnam--in this case, of a February 1965 memorandum National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy sent to President Johnson. "We cannot assert that a policy of sustained [bombing] reprisal [against North Vietnam] will succeed in changing the course of the contest in Vietnam," Bundy wrote, "but even if it fails, the policy will have been worth it. At a minimum, it will damp down the charge that we did not do all we could have done, and this charge will be important in many countries, including our own."<sup>41</sup> Early on in Operation Allied Force, columnist William Safire concluded that "NATO's military mission is to lose honorably, while making the winner pay a cost."<sup>42</sup>

The Clinton administration's refusal to entertain a ground combat option raises a broader policy question: if the so-called "Vietnam syndrome" has crippled America's will to place its own ground forces in harm's way in strategically peripheral places like the former Yugoslavia, then why not attempt to cultivate local surrogate forces? This was the central injunction of the Nixon Doctrine, the practice of the Reagan Doctrine, and the idea behind those who pushed for a "lift-and-strike" policy in Bosnia. Arming the victims of Serbian aggression is the only way that Serbian power can be effectively checked on the ground, and what we are talking here is pure and simple power balancing. To be sure, Nixon's attempt to "Vietnamize" the Vietnam War failed, but it failed ultimately because the government of South Vietnam never gained the political legitimacy required to elicit the sacrifices that might have saved it. But, as Zalmay Khalilzad has pointed out, not only are local political and topographical conditions favorable for an effective insurgency, "in the face of a genocidal war by the Serb army and police, the people of Kosovo have every incentive to defend themselves."<sup>43</sup> And to be sure, the Kosovo Liberation Army does not meet the domestic American political standards, but neither did Stalin's Russia, Park Chung Hee's South Korea, or the Afghan mujihadeen, all of whom the United States supported at one time or another for sound strategic reasons.

The Clinton administration opposed arming the KLA because it opposed the KLA's demand for an independent Kosovo, even though a Kosovo effectively detached from any form of Serbian control -- indeed, a Kosovo protected by foreign

forces in place--would seem an inevitable product of the war's termination.<sup>44</sup> Thus, continued obedience to the delusion of Rambouillet blinded the White House to a major strategic opportunity.

The administration's dogged allegiance, in Bosnia, Serbia, and elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, to the principle of multi-ethnicity within a single state and ultimately democratic<sup>45</sup> state may be unrealistic, but it points to another major difference bearing on the decisions to use force in Vietnam in 1965 and against Serbia in 1999. While both the Johnson and Clinton administrations intervened in what essentially were civil wars, the war within Vietnam was a war among an ethnically homogenous people, and therefore comparatively less complex and arguably less barbarous. Vietnam in 1965 was an artificially divided nation, whereas Serbia is a unified multi-ethnic state. To be sure, the Vietnam War was brutal, but it was free of mass ethnic cleansing.<sup>46</sup>

## **Mis-Reasoning by Historical Analogy**

Before turning to the issue of the regional and international political environments in which the decisions to use force in Vietnam and against Serbia were made, I believe mention should be made of the role that mis-reasoning by historical analogy played in the policy miscalculations of both decisions.<sup>47</sup> Use of force decisions are always influenced by decision-makers' perceptions of what past uses of force teach. The record shows, for example, that memories of the democracies' capitulation to Hitler at Munich exerted a powerful influence on Johnson administration decision-makers, who interpreted the war in Vietnam not as a Vietnamese civil war, *sui generis*, but rather as the Southeast Asian manifestation of a centrally-directed international communist conspiracy dedicated to the overthrow of the entire Free World. Yet there was simply no analogy between Europe of the 1930s and Southeast Asia of the 1960s. Hitler had both Germany's industrial might at his disposal as well as unlimited ambitions in Europe; in contrast, Ho Chi Minh presided over a small, poor, pre-industrial country and his ambitions did not extend beyond Indochina. These differences explain why the European dominoes fell to Hitler from 1936 to 1941 and why the Asian dominoes remained standing after the fall of Saigon.

Faulty reasoning by historical analogy also surrounded the Clinton administration's decision to threaten and then attack Serbia. Secretary of State Albright, a Czech refugee from Nazism, apparently saw an analogy between Milosevic and Hitler even though there was no comparison between the two men's ambitions and resources. Even the establishment of a Greater Serbia in the Balkans would not threaten core US security interests in the trans-Atlantic area. Albright, Clinton, and other administration spokesmen also publicly likened the Balkans of

1999 to the Balkans of 1914. Clinton spoke, of the need to "defuse a powder keg in the heart of Europe" because t4all the ingredients of a major war are present," noting that Sarajevo is where World War I began.<sup>48</sup> In point of fact, the Balkans is not now, and never has been, the heart of Europe, and the idea that events in the former Yugoslavia could set off a general European war ignores the absence today of the great power rivalry in the Balkans that did indeed produce World War I. It further ignores the presence of all but one of Europe's major military powers in an alliance led by the United States.

Ironically, if a major war in Europe does erupt, we, the United States, will have started it. At Rambouillet, we treated the Serbs very much like Austria-Hungary treated them in 1914: giving them an ultimatum they could not accept.

## **Public and Congressional Opinion**

With respect to public and congressional attitudes, the Johnson administration in 1965 enjoyed three substantial advantages over the Clinton administration in 1999. The first was the presence of a national consensus on the organizing principle of US foreign policy (containment of communism). Though this consensus did not survive the Vietnam War, in 1965 it was reflected in the broad public, congressional, and editorial support Johnson's decision to fight in Vietnam received. The second was an institutionally deferential Congress. From the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s until the late 1960s Congress willingly and routinely deferred to the Executive on foreign policy matters, including prospective uses of force. The depth of that deference was manifest in the perfunctorily debated and almost unanimously passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of August 1964, which essentially authorized President Johnson, in advance of potential hostilities, to use force as he saw fit in Southeast Asia. For Johnson in 1965, congressional deference was reinforced by huge Democratic Party majorities in both houses of Congress. The third advantage was a high level of public and congressional confidence in President Johnson's judgment and in the institution of the presidency itself, confidence that was not to survive the twin blows of the Vietnam War and Watergate.

Clinton not only inherited over two decades of declining public trust in the integrity and competence of government, but also an evaporated national consensus on the organizing principle of American foreign policy. He also faced another post-Vietnam, and especially post-Cold War feature of the domestic political environment: a Capitol Hill increasingly assertive on foreign policy matters, including the use of force, and, beginning in 1995, controlled by highly partisan Republican majorities containing significant numbers of neo-isolationists. (The decision to attack Serbia deeply divided congressional Republicans.)<sup>49</sup> Nor did Clinton help himself by engaging in reckless personal behavior that ultimately

provoked his impeachment. Under all of these circumstances, the Clinton White House could not even have hoped to enjoy the degree of public and congressional support for the decision to attack Serbia that Johnson commanded for intervention in Vietnam in 1965. Public and congressional support for Allied Force was thus shaky from the start. In neither Vietnam nor the United States in 1965 did there appear "Wag the Dog" posters, which appeared in both the United States and Serbia in 1999.

## **Regional and International Environments**

Where the Clinton administration did enjoy a significant advantage over Johnson's was in the regional and international environments in which their respective decisions to use force were made. Operation Allied Force enjoyed powerful allied support and was directed against a small, geographically and politically isolated adversary in a post-Soviet world that seemingly precluded any possibility of escalation to direct superpower confrontation. In contrast, Johnson's decision entailed considerably more strategic risk. His decision to intervene in Vietnam attracted practically no effective allied support, and in North Vietnam he was picking an adversary that could-and did--call upon powerful Soviet and Chinese material support. Indeed, the possibility of provoking direct Chinese counter-intervention, for which there was a vivid precedent in the Korean War, could not be ruled out, and there was always the chance, however remote, that the war in Vietnam could produce a direct US-Soviet military confrontation. (Less than three years separated Cuban Missile Crisis, in which Johnson, Bundy, Rusk, and McNamara had all had participated, and the decision to commit US ground combat forces to Vietnam.)

The Johnson administration, however, had a much clearer appreciation of the potential regional and global consequences of its decision to intervene in Vietnam than did the Clinton administration in Serbia. It understood that intervention risked war with China and further antagonism of the Soviet Union, and with the exception of the air power community and its few civilian fellow travelers, the administration, notably President Johnson himself and Dean Rusk, believed that intervention presaged a long, tough, and unpredictable haul in Vietnam. In contrast, the comparative casualness with which the Clinton administration seemingly stumbled into war with Serbia stemmed in no small measure from a failure to think through the potential strategic consequences of attacking Serbia. Those consequences include, among others: the profound, perhaps even permanent, alienation of Russia; the destabilization of Southeastern Europe; the discrediting of NATO in its post-Cold War self-appointed role as a force for peace and stability in former communist Europe; and validation of the image of a United States strategically crippled by an aversion to casualties, both its own and the enemy's.

## Civil-Military Relations

The state of civil-military relations also was arguably worse for Johnson in 1965 than it was for Clinton in 1999. By 1965, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had not only been thoroughly alienated by civilian authority but also shunted aside as significant participants in use of force decisions. Beginning in 1961, McNamara had imposed a managerial revolution on the Pentagon that concentrated power within his own Office of the Secretary of Defense at the expense of the Chiefs. Making matters worse for the JCS was the open contempt for professional military opinion displayed not just by McNamara but by President Kennedy and even more so President Johnson. Indeed, Kennedy went so far as to appoint retired General Maxwell Taylor as his Personal Military Representative, thus bypassing the Chiefs altogether. Thus, by the time the Johnson administration took the plunge in Vietnam, the stage had already been set for bitter civil-military disagreement over how US military power should be employed in Indochina<sup>50</sup> as well as the emergence of the post-war myth that an American military victory there was self-denied by arrogant civilian intrusion on the military's legitimate prerogatives.

The situation for the Clinton White House was quite different. In the two decades following the US departure from Vietnam, the military's influence on use of force decisions increased significantly via self-assertiveness (the Weinberger and Powell doctrines), legislation (the Goldwater-Nichols Act), and the creation of a new active-reserve component relationship (the Total Force Policy) designed to compel reserve mobilization for any use of sizable force overseas. Clinton, in contrast to the contemptuous Johnson, also proved respectful of, even deferential to, military advice, an attitude reinforced by the potential political vulnerability occasioned by his own behavior during the Vietnam War. Indeed, if anything, it was the military that was contemptuous (albeit privately for the most part) of what it regarded as an immature and amateurish president and White House staff.

Clearly, the Pentagon was decidedly unenthusiastic about going to war against Serbia and thought little of the war plan adopted. But going along with both the war and the war plan could be justified in the name of maintaining allied unity, and thereby ultimately preserving NATO's credibility in its new role as the policeman of former communist Eastern Europe. Moreover, because (as of late April, 1999), Operation Allied Force has sustained not a single killed in action, the blood price of going along with the plan was non-existent. No such excuse existed for the senior military leaders who served the Johnson administration, at least one of whom--Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson--later despaired at not having resigned rather than serve a war policy he regarded as ruinous to his own service and to prospects for

victory in Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> The Joint Chiefs of the 1960s served a war policy that got almost 60,000 Americans killed for no strategic purpose.

## **Looking Back**

Indeed, in looking back at the decisions to use force in Vietnam and against Serbia, one must first deal with their profound structural differences: the decision of 1999 was a collective international decision, whereas that of 1965 was a unilateral American one. The 1999 decision represented a lowest common denominator consensus among 19 states, including three new East European members of NATO, whereas Johnson had to accommodate only domestic public and congressional opinion, both of which were in the bag in 1965. Councils of war have rightly been condemned as enemies of military effectiveness, and Allied Force was the product of an international council of war.

But recognition of these realities simply strengthens the central conclusion of this essay: the 1965 Vietnam decision was of a far higher quality than the 1999 Serbia decision. Why? Because compared to the 1999 decision, the 1965 decision was structurally unitary, thoughtfully considered, and consistent with both the perceived strength of threatened US security interests and the political objective sought.

The decision-making process can work but the policy fail. But the odds of a flawed process producing a policy success are much lower. And when strategic confusion poisons an operation from the outset, the chances of success are slim to none.

## Notes

1. Robert S. McNamara, "Misreading the Enemy," New York Times, April 21, 1999.
2. The proposed Rambouillet agreement was dead on arrival, if for no other reason than the Serbs' adamant refusal to accept it, and it is delusional to believe that, after the launching of Operation Allied Force and the subsequent accelerated Serbian genocidal rampage of Kosovo, the surviving Kosovar Albanians would settle for autonomous status within a Serbian state. Yet, as in Bosnia, the Clinton administration clings to the vision of a multi-ethnic and ultimately democratic state.
3. R.W. Apple, Jr., "On Killing From Beyond Harm's Way," New York Times, April 18, 1999.
4. In December 1992, the Bush administration threatened unilateral US military action in the event that Serbia expanded its war elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia to Kosovo. The Clinton administration repeated this warning twice, in February and March, 1993. During the year preceding the launching of Allied Force, a year in which Serbian forces escalated their violence against Kosovar Albanians, President Clinton, Secretary of State Albright, and other administration spokesmen publicly repeated these threats on no fewer than seven separate occasions. See "Statements of U.S. Policy on Kosovo," New York Times, April 18, 1999.
5. During the Vietnam War, unchecked inter-service rivalry compromised the ability of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to provide useful and timely professional advice to the White House and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. That rivalry also blocked prosecution of a unified air war against North Vietnam. Additionally, General William C. Westmoreland, who commanded US troops in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, not only misused US manpower by relying on lavish base camps and a one-year personnel rotation system, but also pursued a strategy of attrition against an enemy that initiated 70-80 percent of all firefights (and thus could control his losses).
6. Especially helpful have been insights provided by four of my colleagues here at the Air War College: Grant Hammond, Michael Hickok, Daniel Hughes, and W. Andrew Terrill.
7. See my *The Wrong War, Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1998), and *Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy*, Munich, Vietnam, and American Use of Force Since 1945. Occasional Paper No. 4. (Maxwell



Air Force Base, AL: Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, March 1998).

8. See *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of the United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*. 4 Volumes. Senator Gravel Edition (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971.); Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1979; and Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981).

9. Zbigniew Brzezinski, "in Kosovo, U.S. Cannot Avoid Grim Choices," *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 1999.

10. A paraphrase of the term, "negligent optimism," used by the *London Economist* in an article in its April 3, 1999 issue, "Did Clinton Think It Through?", p. 19.

11. While there is no concrete evidence that any of President Clinton's statements and directives on the Kosovo crisis were aimed at deflecting public attention from "Monicagate," there is no question that the White House devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to defend itself legally and politically from the potential consequences of the scandal—time that otherwise could have been spent on other issues.

12. One Balkan expert faults Albright and the US diplomatic team at Rambouillet for botching the negotiations because they mistakenly believed the Kosovar Albanians would be compliant, insisted on keeping NATO representatives away from the negotiations, and assumed that the KLA would accept its own dissolution as part of the price for obtaining a settlement. See James Hooper, "Kosovo: America's Balkan Problem," *Current History* (April 1999), pp. 159-64.

13. Quoted in John F. Harris, "Reassuring Rhetoric, Reality in Conflict," *Washington Post* April 8, 1999.

14. See David Gergen, "Our Shame in Kosovo," *U.S. News and World Report*, April 12, 1999, p. 64; Bradley Graham, "Joint Chiefs Doubted Air Strategy," *Washington Post*, April 5, 1999; Michael Hirsh and John Barry, "How We Stumbled Into War," *Newsweek* April 12, 1999, pp. 38-40; Thomas W. Lippmann, "U.S. Miscalculations Traced to Albright," *Washington Post*, April 7, 1999; Jane Perlez, "Step by Step: How

the U.S. Decided to Attack, and Why the Move Came So Fast," New York Times, March 26,1999.

15. Graham, op. cit.

16. Hirsh and Barry, op. cit.

17. Craig R. Whitney with Eric Schmitt, "NATO Had Signs Its Strategy Would Fail Kosovars," New York Times, April 1, 1999; and Thomas E. Ricks, "NATO Commander's Biggest Job is Maintaining Support From Alliance's Members for Airstrikes," Wall Street Journal, April 13, 1999.

18. See Whitney and Schmitt, op. cit.; Barton Gellman, "Slaughter in Racak Changed Kosovo Policy," Washington Post, April 18, 1999; and Elaine Sciolino and Ethan Bronner, "How a President, Distracted by Scandal, Entered the Balkan War," New York Times, April 18,1999.

19. See Michael R. Gordon, "Allies' War by Consensus Limiting Military Strategy," New York Times, April 4,1999.

20. Thomas E. Ricks, et. al., "Support Grows for Bombing Serb TV, Radio Facilities," Wall Street Journal, April 20, 1999.

21. David Ignatius, "Outstaying the Regional Bullies," Washington Post, April 7, 1999.

22. Rolling Thunder was conducted from February 1965 until October 1968 with intermittent bombing pauses. The campaign expended a total of 643,000 tons of munitions against North Vietnam. In contrast, Operation Instant Thunder, the much shorter air campaign against Iraq and Iraqi forces in Kuwait in 1991, dropped a total of 88,000 tons of munitions. Assessments of why Rolling Thunder failed include Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Airpower, The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989, pp. I- 146; Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win, Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY- Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 174-210; James Clay Thompson, *Rolling Thunder, Understanding Policy and Program Failure* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Setup: What the Air Force Did in Vietnam and Why* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1991). "In retrospect," writes Thompson, "the failure of senior American decision makers in the spring of 1965 to appreciate the

weakness of strategic air power as a weapon [against North Vietnam] must be judged a colossal mistake in political-military judgment." (pp. 29-30).

23. See William J. Duiker, *Sacred War. Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995).

24. Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, "'Me Case Against Intervention in Kosovo," *Nation*, April 19, 1999, p. 12.

25. Quoted in David Rhode, "Tactics of '95 Bosnia Crisis May Not Fit Kosovo Case," *New York Times*, April 3, 1999.

26. In his April 1965 speech at the Johns Hopkins University, President Johnson declared that if North Vietnam ceased its aggression against the South, the United States was prepared to finance a massive Mekong River development program along the lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority that brought flood control and electric power to the Tennessee river system in the 1930s.

27. Among those who believed that bombing alone could do the job were former Strategic Air Command chief General Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell, Seventh Air Force commander General William Momyer, Pacific Command's chief Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, and such civilian air power experts as Walt Rostow, McGeorge Bundy's successor as head of the National Security Council Staff.

28. See Lippmann, *op. cit.*

29. See Michael Kelly, "Three Mistakes," *Washington Post*, April 8, 1999. 30. Quoted in David Rhode, *op. cit.*

31. To question air power's utility as an instrument of political coercion is not to disparage its ability to do other things. Air power, broadly defined, is perhaps the single most important component of US conventional military supremacy and force projection capability. Moreover, while strategic bombing never lived up to its promise of becoming an autonomous war-winning instrument, the ability to wreck @ a country's military and economic infrastructures is not to be belittled.

32. Tony Judt, "Tyrannized by Weaklings," *New York Times* April 5, 1999.

33. Eliot A. Cohen, "What's Wrong With the American Way of War," Wall Street Journal, March 30, 1999.
34. Address by President Clinton in San Francisco to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 15, 1999. Excerpted in "Clinton's View of U.S. Goal: 'Peaceful Time for Europe'," New York Times, April 16, 1999.
35. Charles Krauthammer, "Bombing Empty Buildings," Washington Post, April 8, 1999.
36. Fareed Zakaria, "Wage a Full War-Or Cut a Deal," Newsweek, April 12, 1999, p. 44. During the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the Mekong Delta provincial town of Ben Tre was destroyed by American air and artillery attacks as US forces sought to retake from the Viet Cong. A US Army major told a reporter that "It became necessary to destroy [Ben Tre] in order to save it."
37. Gergen, op. cit.
38. Quoted in Eric Schmit, "The Powell Doctrine Is Looking Pretty Good Again," New York Times, April 4, 1999.
39. William E. Odom, "Take Belgrade," Wall Street Journal, April 2, 1999.
40. General Philippe Morillon, quoted in William Pfaff, "Land War in Kosovo?", New York Review of Books, May 6, 1999, p. 20.
41. Quoted in George C. Hening, The Pentagon Papers. Abridged edition. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), p. 112.
42. William Safire, "Me Quiet Noisemaker," New York Times, April 5, 1999.
43. Zalmay Khatilzad, "Kosovars Need More Than Bombs From the West," Wall Street Journal, March 25, 1999.
44. See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Van Evera, "Redraw the Map, Stop the Killing," New York Times, April 19, 1999.
45. A vision presented in "Why the Allies Must Fight On," a letter written by President Clinton to the (London) Sunday Times, April 18, 1999.

46. Vietnamese communist forces did indeed commit atrocities, in one case killing all the inhabitants of an anticommunist Montagnard village. Yet communist terror in Vietnam was almost always highly selective in character, and in terms of numbers of victims, much less of a threat to the peasantry in the contested areas of Vietnam than the often indiscriminate US bombing and shelling of real and suspected enemy targets in the countryside.

47. See my *Perils of Reasoning by Historical Analogy*, op. cit., and Jonathan Alter, "The Trouble With History," *Newsweek*, April 12, 1999, p. 41.

48. See Ethan Bronner, "Historians Note Flaws in President's Speech," *New York Times*, March 26, 1999.

49. See Robert Kagan, "Kosovo and the Echoes of Isolationism," *New York Times*, March 24, 1999; and William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Kosovo and the Republican Future," *Weekly Standard*, April 5/April 12, 1999, pp. 11-12-, and Fareed Zakaria, "Conservative Confusion in Kosovo," *Wall Street Journal*, April 14, 1999.

50. The military's principal complaints were the White House's refusal to mobilize the reserves, prohibition of US ground force operations in southern Laos, and imposition of significant targeting and rules-of-engagement restrictions on air operations against North Vietnam.

51. For an excellent portrait of this genuinely agonized man, see Lewis Sorley, *Honorable Warrior. General Harold K. Johnson and the Ethics of Command* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998).

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